

APOLOGY FOR THE ENSLAVEMENT AND RACIAL SEGREGATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Senator Tom Harkin, joined by Senator Sam Brownback, has introduced S. Con Res. 26, a concurrent resolution apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans. The Senate is scheduled to pass the resolution Thursday, June 18 and the House shortly thereafter.

After making detailed findings regarding slavery and the system of de jure segregation known as “Jim Crow,” the resolution reads that the Congress:

Acknowledges the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow laws;

Apologizes to African-Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed against them and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow laws; and

Expresses its recommitment to the principle that all people are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and calls on all people of the United States to work toward eliminating racial prejudices, injustices and discrimination from our society.

States – Alabama, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina and Virginia – and corporations such as J.P. Morgan and Aetna have apologized for their role in slavery and Jim Crow. Slavery and Jim Crow, and their continuing consequences, however, are not merely the historical baggage of one state, one region, or one company. They are an enduring national shame. It was the nation that enshrined slavery in the Constitution and protected it for a century. It is Congress that passed laws such as the Missouri Compromise and Fugitive Slave Act. It was the nation’s Supreme Court which bolstered slavery and affirmed segregation in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* and *Plessey v. Ferguson*.

This resolution is not novel or unique. In 1988, Congress apologized for the internment of Japanese Americans held during WWII. In 1993, Congress apologized to native Hawaiians for overthrowing their king. In 2005, the Senate apologized for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation. Last year, the Senate adopted as part of the Indian Health Bill an amendment apologizing to Native Americans. The resolution, therefore, addresses a glaring oversight that Congress has not, on behalf of the nation, acknowledged and apologized for slavery and Jim Crow.

Finally, African-Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow – long after both systems were formally abolished. While the resolution is long overdue, we need to continue working together to create better opportunities for all Americans, which is truly the best way to address the lasting legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.